DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 123 016 RC 009 202

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TITLE Team Sports and Conflict Resolution Among the Mississippi Choctaw.
PUB DATE 19 Nov 74
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (73d, Mexico City, November 19-24, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Aggression; *American Indians; Anglo Americans; *Athletics; Behavior Patterns; Community Relations; *Conflict; *Conflict Resolution; Cross Cultural Studies; *Emotional Response; Intergroup Relations; Problem Solving; Sportsmanship; Teamwork; Violence
IDENTIFIERS *Choctaw; Mississippi

ABSTRACT

Four hypotheses pertaining to conflict and its resolution in the team sport experience among seven Choctaw communities were tested: Choctaws have a unique conception of conflict vis-a-vis Anglos; this conception has a limiting effect on the exercise or occurrence of more dramatic forms of violence; this notion is reflected in Choctaw team sport behavior; and both modern and traditional sports among the Choctaw function as intercommunity conflict resolution mechanisms, serving either to act out or avoid potentially more dangerous types of disagreement. Data were collected between March and October 1974 via observations of various athletic events, discussions, structured interviews with individual athletes, and psychological tests (Multiple Affect Adjective Check List (MAACL) and nonstandardized projective plates). In 15 Choctaw and Anglo cases, the MAACL was used to elicit ideal attitudinal states associated with basketball participation. Additional data were obtained from several non-Choctaw groups in Philadelphia, Mississippi; Murfreesboro, Tennessee; and Zuni, New Mexico. Some findings were: while more aggressive, the Choctaws were more opposed to disruptive violence; Choctaws acted out the type of conflict necessary in athletic competition yet at the same time made a greater effort to avoid open hostility; and Choctaws were more concerned with the excellence of their personal performance than with winning. (NQ)

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TEAM SPORTS AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION AMONG THE MISSISSIPPI CHOCTAW*

by
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In recent decades modern team sports like football, basketball, baseball and softball have become important facets of everyday life among the Mississippi Choctaw, to a certain extent having replaced traditional games (e.g., stickball, chunkey). The purpose of this paper is to consider the function of these new athletic activities within the broader structure of Choctaw society, particularly as they manifest culture-specific patterns of conflict and serve as mechanisms for the resolution of that conflict at both intra- and inter-group levels.

When I use the term "sport" I am referring to a particular form of play that involves physical exertion, organization, and an explicit set of rules (Edwards, 1973:54). On the other hand, by "athletics" I mean the formal organization of team sports into groups of participants (e.g., league, conference). "Conflict" in this context is generalized disagreement between either individuals or groups as perceived by the participants in the relationship (see Figure 1).

Underlying this analysis is the theoretical assumption that team sport activites are one means of acting out the several levels of conflict characteristic of the total cultural environment (Blanchard, 1974). Contrary to the often simplistic sport-and-aggression explanations voiced by physical educators (Tandy and Laflin, 1973; Beisser, 1967:17), I am suggesting that these activities neither reduce nor increase the incidents of violence in areas beyond their own immediate domains (i.e., the total cultural contexts of the competing teams).

The potential conflict that characterizes the relationship between two groups can be expressed in a sports event involving teams representative of these two factions. This event manifests patterns of conflict characteristic of the competitors' respective value systems and either lessen, heighten, or simply not affect the future occurrence of violence only within the total cultural environment of that particular encounter. The athletic experience does not act as a general catharsis to relieve aggressive tendencies nor does it instill a destructive tension that must in turn be expressed in other facets of behavior (e.g., deviant, abnormal).

For example, if a team from Town A plays a team from Town B in a formally organized football contest, the conflict expressed in the event is determined by two factors: 1) the way in which the competitors perceive conflict and 2) the history of Town A and Town B interrelationships. As a result of the game, the following can occur: 1) potential conflict over broader issues in inter-community relations can be avoided, 2) inter-community

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Paper presented at the 73rd Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Assoc, Mexico City, 19-24 Nov '74

tensions can either be increased or decreased, 3) new sources of inter-community conflict be generated. Regardless of the outcome, however, the function and results of the contest will be confined to Towns A and B and their future relationships with each other.

The following week, when Team A plays Team C, the similarities of aggression manifested in Game 1 and Game 2 will be a result of Team A's consistent conflict behavior. Theoretically, Game 1 should have absolutely no effect on the character of the violence in Game 2, nor will it influence the relationship between Town A and Town C. This understanding of the sport-and-violence

This understanding of the sport-and-violence problem is consistent with Sipes's (1973:80) conclusion that war and combative sports show a direct cross-cultural relationship and do not

> ...act as alternative channels for the discharge of accumulable aggressive tensions. Rather than being functional alternatives, war and combative sports activities in a society appear to be components of a broader culture pattern.

In looking at the specific problem of conflict and its resolution in the team sport experience among the seven Choctaw communities, I am testing the following h potheses:

1. that the Choctaw have a unique conception of conflict vis-a-vis Anglo speakers of English;
2. that this conception of conflict has a limiting effect on the exercise or occurrence of more dramatic forms of violence;
3. that this notion of conflict is reflected in Choctaw team sport behavior;
4. that both modern and traditional sports among the Choctaw function as inter-community conflict resolution mechanisms, serving in many cases to either act out or avoid potentially more dangerous types of disagreement.

The data for this paper were collected in the period between March and October, 1974. During that time I spent a total of approximately five weeks working with the Choctaw in Mississippi. I gathered additional material for purposes of cross-cultural analysis from several non-Choctaw groups in Philadelphia, Mississippi, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and Zuni, New Mexico. I observed and analyzed many athletic events, discussed sport and conflict with informants, conducted structured interviews with individual athletes, and administered several psychological tests. The latter included 562 MAACLs (Multiple Affect Adjective Check List): General, 288 MAACLs:Today, and 315 non-standardized projective plates(Tindall,1974). In 15 cases, Choctaw and Anglo, I used the MAACL as a device for eliciting ideal attitudinal states associated with basketball participation (see Tables 1 and 2).

Choctaw sports

The most popular and important game in Choctaw tradition is what Swanton (1931:140) calls the "2-stick racket game," now

more commonly referred to simply as "stickball" (towa). The earliest written descriptions of the sport date from the mid 1700's and are fairly consistent with the most recent observations of the game.

The basic equipment for the game includes two hickory sticks (kapucha) carved and looped at one end to provide a frame for a loosely woven leather netting. The ball is approximately 1 and 1/2 inches in diameter and made of tightly wound, narrown leather strands.

The playing area is defined only by the goalsposts at opposite ends of the field, the length of which will vary from one game to the next (Local folklore makes reference to a stickball contest once played on a field in which the goal posts were placed five miles apart.).

The number of players on competing sides is likewise variable, the only restriction being that both sides field equal numbers of participants. Catlin (1913:143) describes one such event he witnessed in which 600-700 players were involved.

The object of the game is to move the ball either by carrying or throwing it with the sticks and striking it against the goal being defended by the opposing team. While the winning point total has usually been subject to situational definition, the normal pattern has been for the game to progress until one team scores 12 points.

The game begins when a designated official throws the ball into the air in the center of the field. The only prohibitive rule is that one can only handle the ball with his sticks, and the game is predictably rough.

Traditionally, the stickball game was the setting for much ceremony and festivity, and would often be the focal point for several days of activities involving the competing Choctaw communities. Gambling on the outcome of the amain event was extensive. ASAs one older informant has described it:

> They would bet and put things on the scaffolds, and the leaders would watch the scaffolds. They put everything,your pants, your shoes, money, ballstick, everything. You lose and you might have to go home naked. You bet yoke oxen, you lose the oxen, but next game you might win it back, just l like in a game.

During the 1890's, local Whites increasingly got involved as curious onlookers at the spectacular stickball games in Mississippi, and their presence became increasingly evident as they introduced large amounts of liquor, enlarged betting stakes, and caused additional disruptions. Finally, around 1900, a fatal shooting occurred as a result of a disagreement over a large wager between two Anglos. Because of the incident the

state banned stickball playing until 1950, when it was reinstated in conjunction with the staging of the annual Choctaw Fair.

Western sports began to ebe introduced into Mississippi Choctaw life in the period following the outlawing of stickball. Baseball became popular as the boys began to play with local Whites in impromptu, cow pasture contests. Around 1920 young Choctaws began to play basketball on the outdoor courts of nearby schoolyards, and by 1950 most of them had been introduced football and softball as well through the grade school experience.

High school athletics did not come to the Mississippi group country until Choctaw Central High School was opened in 1964. Prior to that local teenagers could oonly get a secondary education by matriculating to an Indian school in Oklahoma. With the new high school came a new athletic program; basketball in 1965, football in 1966. Within a few years of its inception Choctaw Central was competing in a full schedule of athletic events with other high schools in the area.

In 1965 a recreation program was developed under the auspices of the tribal government, and within several years a large percentage of Choctaw adults and young persons were competing in basketball, baseball, and softball leagues. In 1974 the several events attracted a total of over 900 participants from the seven Choctaw communities.

Indicative of their preoccupation with team sports today is the fact that the typical Choctaw spends an average of a little more than one hour a day involved with some form of athletics, either as spectator or participant (This does not include radio listening or television viewing). This is in comparison to the average Anglo in a random sample from a small, sports-conscious city in Tennessee who devotes less than half that time to comparable activities.

Team sports and conflict among the Choctaw

The Choctaw today conceive of themselves as having been peace-loving people over the past several hundred years. Despite the fact that history in certain cases disputes this, their behavior suggests that they are much more deliberate in their attempt to avoid Level IV and Level V types of conflict than their Anglo counterparts in this country (see Figure 1).

Stickball was an extremely violent and brutal game. Encounters were sometimes cancelled short of the normal winning score because injuries had riddled team numbers to the extent that too few were left to continud play. Still, according to many early observors, unstructured, disruptive violence

was rare. Bossu (1768:100) claims "The players never become angry." Hodgson, (1823:271) reports that "All violence on these occasions is forgiven, and was informed that it is the only case in which life is not generallly required for life." Cushman (1899:190), in a dramatic description, observes:

> In those ancient ball-plays, I have known villages to lose all their earthly possessions upon the issue of a single play. Yet, they bore their misfortune with becoming grace and philosophic indifference and appeared as gay and cheerful as if nothing of importance had occurred.

On the other hand, some early observors mentioned fist fights and family feuds resulting from bruising encounters on the playing field (Culin, 1907:604). Despite the fact that these altercations obviously did occur on occasion, it is significant that they were and still are viewed with regret and embarassment by members of the participating communities.

The nature of the conflict manifested by the Choctaw in connection with modern team sports is in many cases obviously unique from that expressed by a sample of Anglo athletes in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. For example, the following distinctive tendencies vis-a-vis the latter group have been observed:

1. The Choctaw are aggressive in team sports yet at the same time more opposed to disruptive violence than their Anglo counterparts. In an analysis of incidental and non-incidental contact at the point of the ball in two men's basketball leagues, one Choctaw, the other Anglo, I discovered, contrary to my initial premonitions, that the former are as physical on the court as the latter. In both groups the teams averaged between 1.00 and 1.64 contact incidents per minute of playing time.

Still in comparing the results of the projective tests administered to students at Choctaw Central and at Riverdale (Murfreesboro) High School, it is evident that the Choctaw have a greater distain for unnecessary friction in the sport setting. For example, in responding to Plate #4, both groups see the coach as mad or very upset, however 85% of the Choctaw see the mentor's attitude as "bad," as opposed to only 7% of the Anglo. It is also significant that 92% of the Mississippi group, versus 21% of the Tennessee students, do not think they would like the angry coach in real life.

2. The Choctaw can act out the type of conflict necessary in athletic competition yet at the same time make a greater effort to avoid open hostility. Using the MAACL as a means of constructing an emic model of "Ideal Attitudinal States" prerequisite to basketball, I have noted an interesting tendency. The Choctaw hoopsters put an emphasis on conflictual categories roughly equal to that of their Anglo counterparts, but stress much more the importance of conciliatory adjectives (see Table

1). Likewise, Choctaw spectators use the language (e.g.,kill him, tear his head off, bust his ass) but in reality abhor outbreaks of disruptive violence, as opposed to Anglo fans who seem to enjoy the occasional explosion of physical hostility on the playing field.

The projective tests reflect similar distinctions:

a. Sixty-two percent of the Anglos versus 15% of the Choctaws see the players' fighting in Plate #1 as "normal" for football.

b. Responding to the runner-tackler confrontation in Plate #3, 94% of the Choctaws claim there is no deliberate effort to hurt, while only 27% of the Anglo group express as similar denial.

c. The discord in Plate #5 is viewed as"normal" by 78% of the Murfreesboro students, in comparison to only 29% of the Native American group. Again, 35% of the former sample as opposed to 12% of the latter, view the event as "good."

3. The Choctaw are more concerned with the excellence of their personal performance than with winning. This is demonstrated by their proneness to blame themselves for their failures in the game before they turn to external factors. For example, in Plate #2, 75% of the Choctaws see the emotion of the fans directed toward their own team (i.e., they are upset because their team is losing), while only 44% of the Anglos respond in this fashion. Again, 50% of the latter versus only 11% of the former see the reaction of the spectators as hostility toward the referees.

4. Despite the fact that the Choctaw place a premium on individual excellence, they are prone to stress intra-group harmony to a greater extent than do the Anglo athletes from middle Tennessee. This is reflected in the fact that 40% of the White males saw the players in Plate #1 on the same team while only 7% of the Mississippians in a corresponding category responded in this fashion. A similar comparison is characteristic of the reaction to Plate V; fifty percent of the Anglos and 12% of the Choctaws make teammates of the quarreling duo.

It can be argued that there are several obvious reasons for the Choctaw emphasis on such group harmony. On the one hand, several informants have noted that you simply do not reprimand or forcefully instruct a fellow tribesman. It is best to teach by example. Also, there is a high degree of inter- and intra-team relatedness in Choctaw recreation league rosters. For example, the thirteen teams in the 1973-74 basketball program were composed of a total 129 players, of which 118 were Choctaw. Of these, 68 were related to at least one other person on their own team in a toal of 89 intra-team pairings (i.e., 8 Fa:So, 36 Br:Br, 24 FaBrSo:FaBrSo, 2 WiFa:DaHu, 13 MoSiSo:MoSiSo, 2 MoBrSo:FaSiSo, 1 BrSo:FaBr). In addition, most of the players had at least one, and some more than ten kin ties to members of other teams. All of this can be compared to a men's basketball league in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, in which

there were a total of five known relationships affecting a total of six individuals.

5. Choctaw athletes are less concerned with winning and its related philosophical rationales and more excited about simply enjoying the game and the act of playing well than their Anglo complements. For example, while the latter emphasize the importance of attitudinal categories like inspiration, devotion, steadiness, and wholeness, the tribal group showed greater interest in being cheerful, satisfied, joyful (see Table 2).

In general, it appears that the Choctaw, while they can talk about the several levels of conflict and apply the language to the athletic setting, are more capable than the non-Choctaw group of bracketing destructive aggression within the sport context. Their behavior here in acting out broader cultural realities suggests that violence is a less frequent alternative in Choctaw society than it is in the typical Anglo-American situation.

Choctaw sports and conflict resolution

When asked about the function of modern sports as compared to that of traditional stickball, Choctaw informants make a qualitative distinction between the "pure fun" dimensions of the former and the more "purposeful" direction of the latter. The emic explanation for stickball competition suggests that in the past pleasure was incidental to the game's broader role in inter-community affairs. On the other hand, the more recent forms of recreation are seen purely as enjoyable pastimes .

One frequently expressed rationale for the scheduling of a typical stickball game of yesteryear is that the sport served as a conflict resolving device between communities. One informant suggests

> In the old days, two communities would have trouble with each other, something that could really lead to real fighting. They would decide to have a stickball match, and their best players would have a game. This way they wouldn't have to fight. The community that won would feel good.

Haas (1940:479) has described a similar process among the early Creeks in which towns of the Confederacy would use the "two-goal ball game" to work out and maintain inter-community role relationships.

While admittedly it was often the source of new excuses for violence, it appears likely that stickball in Choctaw society during the early centuries of the historic period was seen by both spectators and participants as a logical and less disruptive alternative form of conflict.

Again, contrary to the emic portrayal of the experience,

the newer team sport activities appear to serve ends similar to those of the older stickball, though not perhaps as explicitly.

In the first place, contemporary Choctaw athletes use the same conflict language in discussing and describing both old and new sport behavior.

Again, the etic explanation finds reinforcement in the fact that quite obviously today's Choctaw find the team sport event tremendously entertaining, a reality in itself that would tend to lower the frequency of disruptive forms of conflict in other areas of cultural interaction.

It is likewise of note that in all four situations where the General MAACLs were administered--Choctaw Central, Philadelphia(MS), Riverdale (TN), and Zuni (NM) High Schools--the individuals who could be classed as athletes among the male student populations showed significantly lower levels of anxiety, depression, and hostility than the non-athlete group (see Figure 2). Differences here were much greater than those resulting from all other intra-group comparisons (sex, ethnic group, age), and more significant in the Choctaw case than any other.

Additional supportive data arises from the fact that continuing issues of potential conflict dimensions exist between the seven Choctaw communities surrounding Philadelphia. Problems of recognition, representation, and resource allocation are just a few of the possible sources of inter-group discord.

Finally, athletic functions at both the high school and recreation program levels, provide many opportunities for social interaction between members of the tribe and thus lower inter-community tensions.

Summary and conclusion

Team sports have long played an important role in the ongoing history of Choctaw relations both with outsiders and among themselves. It seems that they are still being used as a means of acting out conflict needs through legitimate, communicative devices (e.g., display, presentation, non-hostile contact).

In many ways this says more about Choctaw society as a whole than about their team sports themselves. Relative to Anglo-American patterns of behavior, the tribesmen from Mississippi have developed a more effective technique for dealing with the problem of destructive violence. By projecting attitudes that stigmatize such violence they limit its occurrence, and this is evident when they compete on the playing field, be it basketball, baseball, football, or stickball.

Again, it appears that athletic competition is a means by which intra- and inter-community disagreements can be either avoided or resolved in Choctaw society, although occasionally new conflict problems can be caused by the game encounter itself.

Overall, however, team sports are part of the continuing process of maintaining group harmony in the midst of inevitable issues of conflict potential. Despite the fact that emic explanations limit this function to traditional stickball, I believe that modern sports serve the same ends, but by more subtle means.

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*Research for this paper was conducted under an MTSU faculty grant, 1-27800-0016. I am also indebted to the Choctaw for their cooperation and hospitality. Specifically, I would like to thank Phillip Martin, Albert Farve, Leonard Jimmie, Jackson Isaac, Jimmy Gibson ,and Dee Henry.

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TABLE 1:
MAACL: Ideal Attitudinal States; Basketball
Conflict Categories: Choctaw versus Anglo

Choctaw				Anglo		
Number Checking(10)	Total Emphasis(30)	Coef.*	Adjective	Number Checking(5)	Total Emphasis(15)	Coef.*
0	0	0	Agitated	1	1	1
9	23	85.7	Aggressive	5	15	100.0
3	6	26.7	Angry	2	2	31.0
0	0	0	Annoyed	0	0	0
0	0	0	Bitter	0	0	0
0	0	0	Contrary	0	0	0
1	2	9.0	Cross	0	0	0
2	4	17.7	Cruel	2	2	31.0
1	3	10.0	Enraged	0	0	0
2	6	20.0	Furious	2	2	31.0
2	6	20.0	Hostile	2	3	33.3
0	0	0	Incensed	0	0	0
0	0	0	Irriated	0	0	0
2	4	17.7	Mad	2	2	31.0
1	3	10.0	Mean	3	4	49.0
1	3	10.0	Outraged	0	0	0
6	12	53.3	Rough	3	6	53.3
1	3	10.0	Stormy	0	0	0
0	0	0	Unsociable	0	0	0
0	0	0	Vexed	0	0	0
Mean Coefficient		14.5				18.8

* (% Checking) x 2 + (% Total Emphasis) divided by 3.

(TABLE 1:)

MAACL: Ideal Attitudinal States; Basketball
Conciliatory Categories: Choctaw versus Anglo

Choctaw				Anglo		
Number Checking(10)	Total Emphasis(30)	Coef.*	Adjective	Number Checking(5)	Total Emphasis(15)	Coef.*
1	3	10.0	Affectionate	0	0	0
5	11	45.7	Agreeable	1	2	17.7
0	0	0	Amiable	0	0	0
8	19	74.3	Cheerful	2	4	35.7
6	16	57.7	Friendly	2	2	31.0
4	12	40.0	Gentle	0	0	0
6	14	55.7	Good-natured	1	2	17.7
2	4	17.7	Kindly	0	0	0
3	8	29.0	Loving	0	0	0
0	0	0	Obliging	0	0	0
4	12	40.0	Peaceful	0	0	0
5	14	49.0	Polite	1	2	17.7
6	14	55,7	Understanding	2	6	40.0
3	7	27.7	Warm	1	3	20.0
Mean Coefficient		39.4				12.8

TABLE 2:
MAACL: Ideal Attitudinal States; Basketball
Unique Adjective Identifications: Choctaw versus Anglo

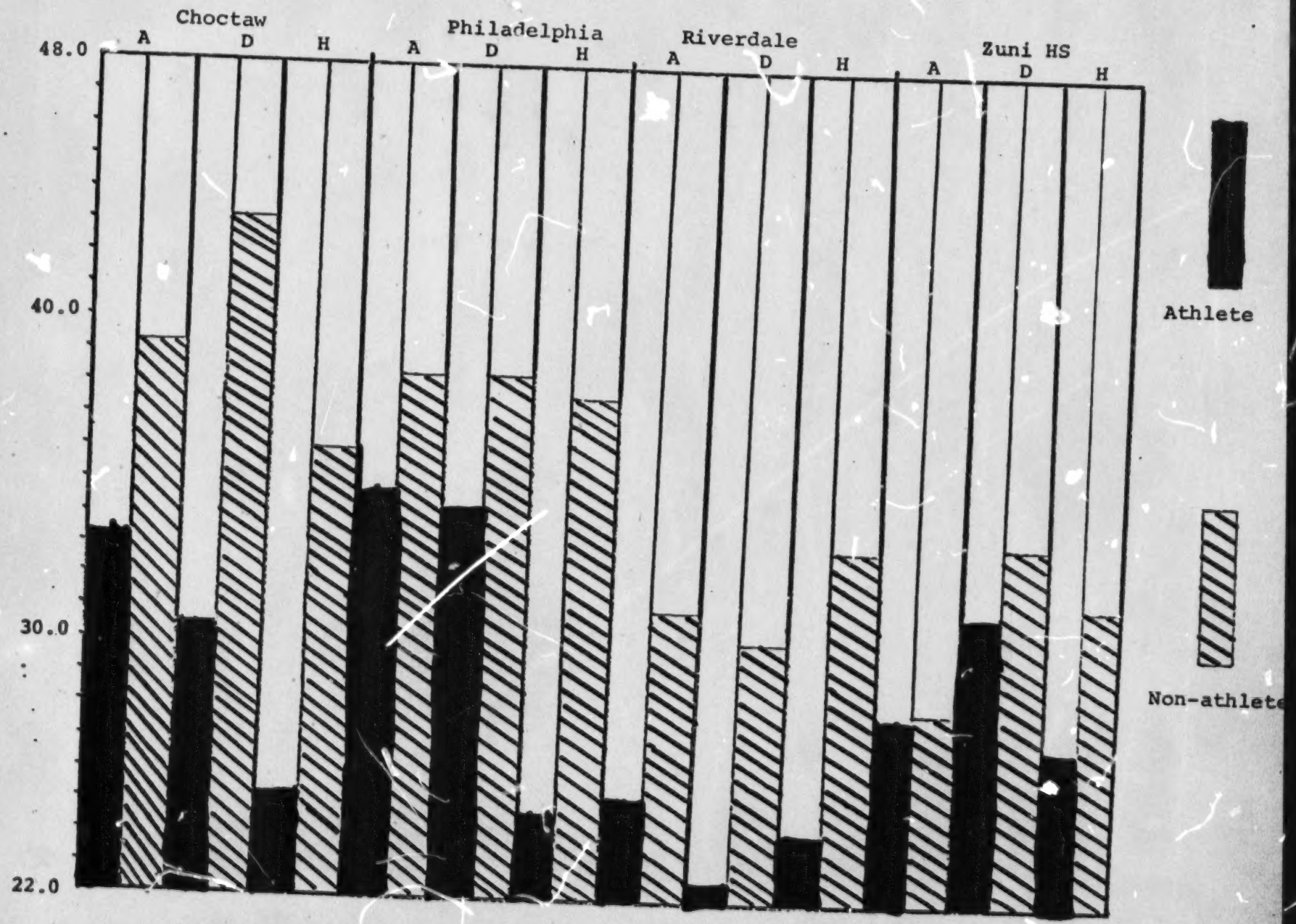
Choctaw			Anglo	
Term	Rank	Coefficient	Rank	Coefficient
Cheerful	7	75.7	33	33.3
Clear	10	64.3	34	35.7
Satisfied	13	63.3	60	15.7
Friendly	16	57.7	35	31.0
Good-natured	20	55.7	52	17.7
Understanding	21	55.7	30	40.0
Cautious	22	55.7	50	31.0
Polite	25	49.0	--	17.7
Joyful	28	45.7	--	0

Anglo			Choctaw	
Term	Rank	Coefficient	Rank	Coefficient
Inspired	8	95.7	34	37.7
Devoted	12	73.3	--	0
Steady	13	69.0	50	27.7
Daring	16	62.3	30	37.7
Tense	17	62.3	50	25.7
Whole	18	57.7	--	0
Secure	23	55.7	45	27.7
Mean	29	49.0	60	10.0

FIGURE 1: Conflict (defined componentially in units or levels of generalized disagreement)

Individual		Group
Attitude	LEVEL I Unexpressed	Value
	LEVEL II Expressed Normal Communication	
Posture	Phase I: Non-Verbal	
Dialogue, debate	Phase II: Verbal	Discussion
	LEVEL III Expressed Strained Communication	
Posture	Phase I: Non-Verbal	
Argument	Phase II: Verbal	Dispute, riot
	LEVEL IV Physical Sub-lethal intent	
Fight, hurt, maim	Phase I: Non-Mechanized	Arrest, raid, feud
Knife, club, cut	Phase II: Mechanized	Riot control, feud, mace
	LEVEL V Physical Lethal Intent	
Murder (Strangling, beating)	Phase I: Non-Mechanized	Hand-to-hand combat
Murder (Shooting, knifing)	Phase II: Mechanized	War, bombing

FIGURE 2:
MULTIPLE AFFECT ADJECTIVE CHECK LIST: Comparative Scores (Athlete vs. Non-Athlete)
(Percentage Scores)



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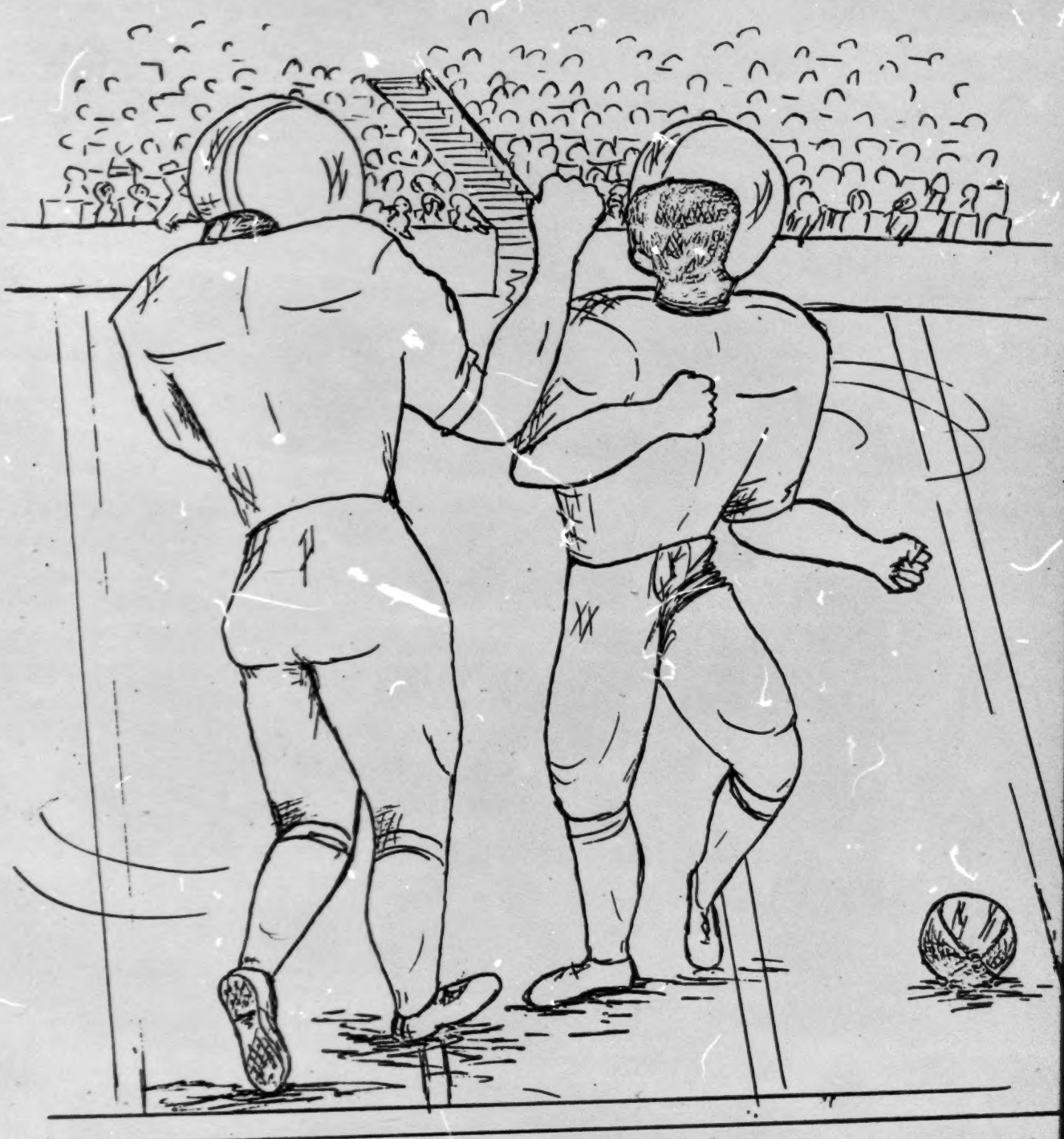

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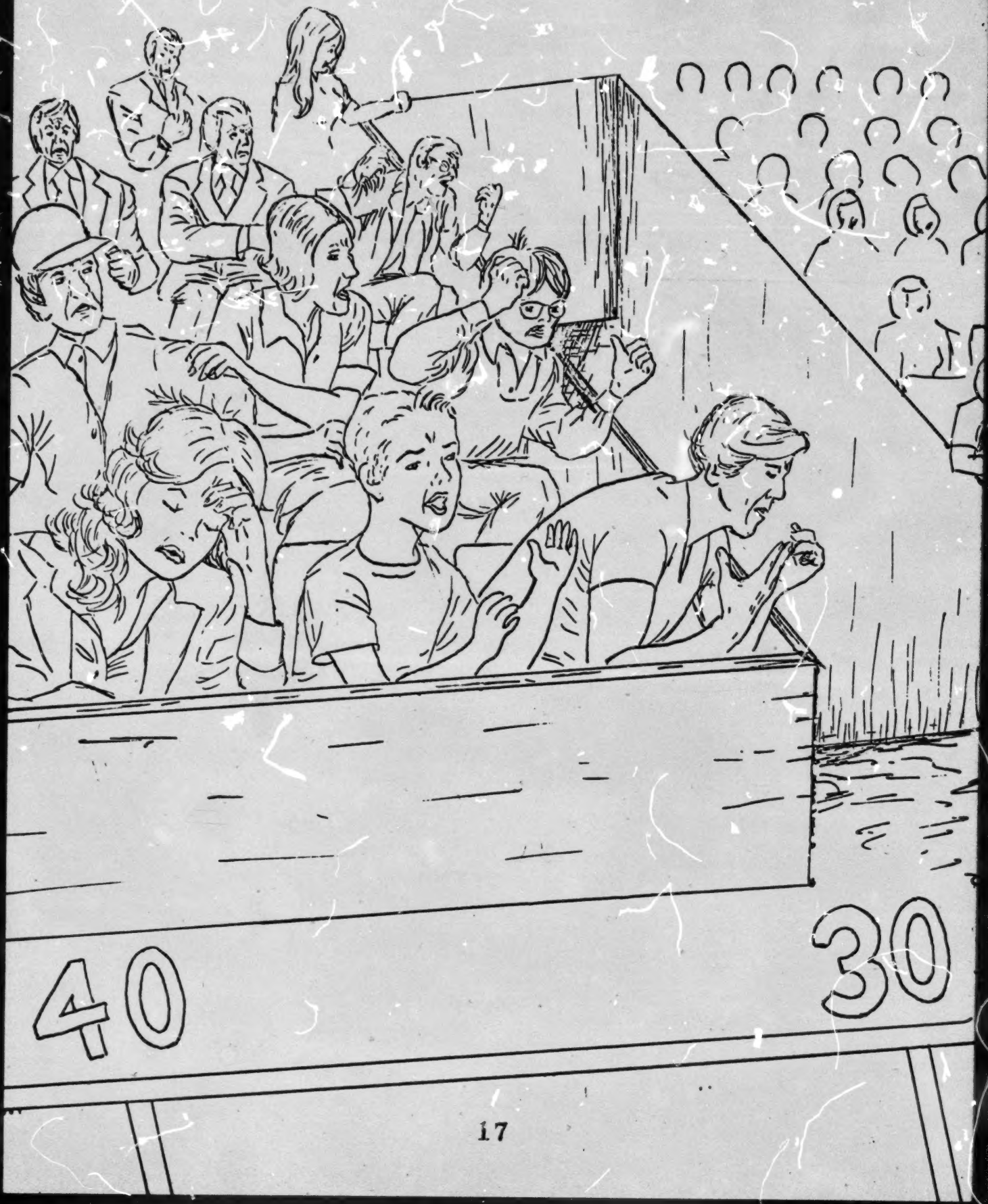

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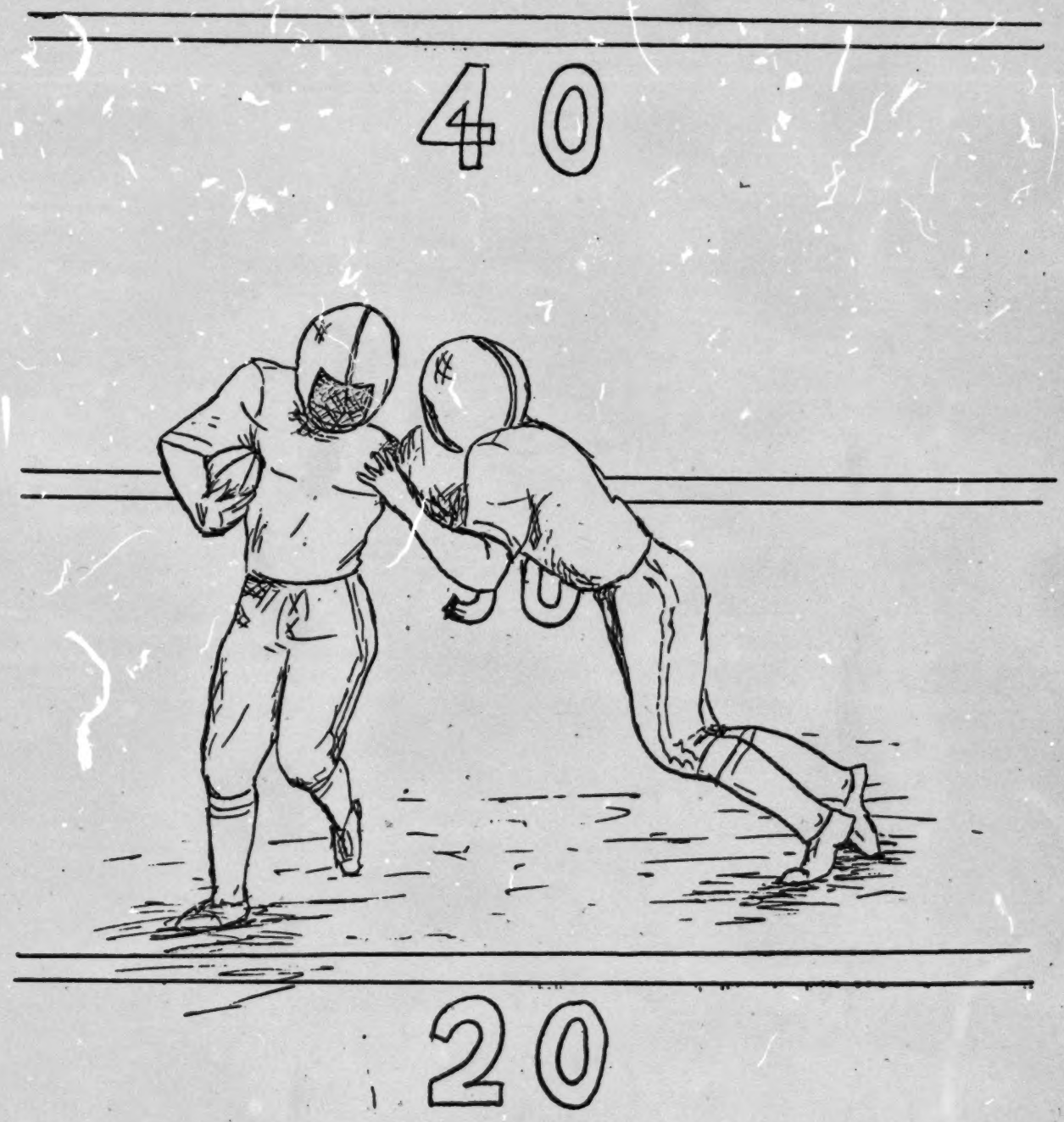

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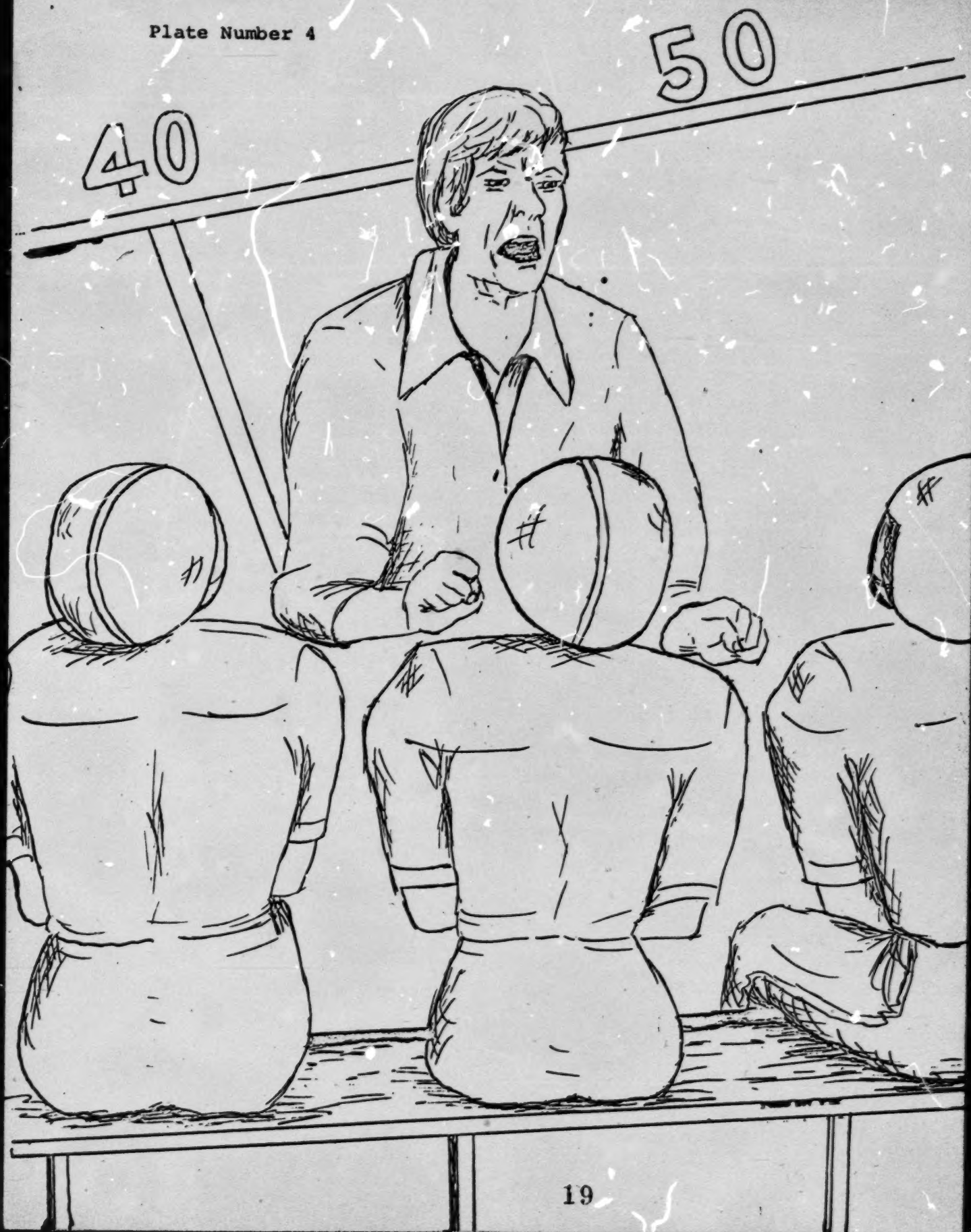

Plate Number 5